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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 001445

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/IPA AND EUR/WE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2013

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE REQUESTS U.S. APPROACH ISRAEL ON VISAS
FOR RELIGIOUS WORKERS IN ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Classified By: Charge d'affairs D. Brent Hardt. Reasons: 1.5 (b)
and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Vatican Foreign Minister equivalent Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo told the Ambassador April 6 of the Holy See's mounting frustration with Israel's unwillingness to address visa and residency problems for religious workers in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The obstacles faced by Catholic religious workers in obtaining the required visas and residency permits have created "great difficulties" for the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem to have contact with Catholic faithful in the territories and to train seminarians, Lajolo emphasized. In light of Prime Minister Sharon's upcoming meeting with the President, Lajolo requested U.S. intervention with Israel to encourage action to resolve this problem. Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Sodano had raised the Holy See's concerns on Israeli visa issues with Vice President Cheney during his January 27 meeting in the Vatican, asking him to urge Israel to engage more seriously with the Holy See to resolve the visa and residency concerns. End Summary.

Vatican Appeal for U.S. Help

2. (C) During an April 6 meeting to discuss Iraq (septel), Holy See Foreign Minister equivalent Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo told the Ambassador that the Vatican was currently having "some problems" with Israel relating to visas and residency permits for religious workers in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. At present, he pointed out, there were at least 138 cases of pending requests for residency permits, most of whom have already worked in the region and who are simply seeking renewals. The Holy See has raised its concerns repeatedly with Israel, including with President Katsav, Foreign Minister Shalom and with Israel's Minister of Internal Affairs. Foreign Minister Shalom told the Holy See in December 2003 that the difficulties were due to "Israeli bureaucracy and to concerns over security" -- a position repeated by Israel's Ambassador to the Holy See. Shalom's promise to set up a working group to study the pending questions has yet to be followed up. In the meantime, many religious workers are being detained for lack of visas or renewed permits, and others are unable to leave the territories even for family emergencies out of fear of being denied reentry. In this context, Lajolo said the Holy See would appreciate if the U.S. could encourage the Government of Israel "to have more humanity on this point." The Ambassador promised to convey the Holy See's concerns to Washington and advise of any action taken.

Background to the Residency Problems

3. (C) To reinforce his points, Lajolo passed the Ambassador a memorandum (text below) detailing the background to the current difficulties. The memo points out that the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which is responsible for Catholics in Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, and Cyprus, "must be able to have contact with its faithful," and therefore must have the right to train seminarians and appoint religious personnel. Both the Patriarchate and the Vatican's Nunciature in Jerusalem assume responsibility for the religious personnel and their activities in the Palestinian territories, the latter issuing laissez-passer to the workers. The Holy See regards Israel's citing security concerns as a reason for delaying the permits as demonstrating "a lack of regard" for the Patriarchate and Nunciature. It also notes that the "Fundamental Agreement" which established diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See in 1994 recognizes the right of the Church to "train, appoint, and deploy" its personnel in institutions of a religious, moral, educational, and charitable character.

4. (C) The memo details key diplomatic contacts to date on

the issue, pointing out that President Katsav promised the Holy See's Secretary of State Sodano "his personal attention" to the matter of visas during a December 2002 meeting. In July 2003, the Vatican presented Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom a pro-memoria again raising the issue of visas to religious personnel. In December 2003, FM Shalom told Cardinal Sodano that the continuing difficulties were due to "Israeli bureaucracy and to concerns over security," and proposed the creation of a working group to examine the issue. In March 2004, the Nuncio in Jerusalem wrote to the Israeli Minister of Internal Affairs indicating that the

situation remained unresolved and was "in clear violation of a number of points in the Fundamental Agreement." The Vatican's perception is that Israel appears to be denying permits to any religious worker who has worked permanently in the Palestinian Territories or who intends to work there. This policy, they have concluded, is "tantamount to impeding the provision of pastoral care in the Territories."

Comment

15. (C) The continuing visa and residency permit problems have brought the Holy See's relationship with Israel to a nadir not seen since the hopeful launch of relations in March 1994.

Israel unexpectedly broke off discussion to conclude the outstanding aspects of the Fundamental Agreement in August 2003, and was actively considering closing its Vatican Embassy. Then, in late 2003, Prime Minister Sharon deliberately avoided calling on the Pope during a three day visit to Rome in late 2003 despite quiet Vatican overtures indicating the Pope would welcome such a call. FM Lajolo indicated that the Holy See would have protested the breaking off of negotiations publicly, but believed this would have been counterproductive. He emphasized to the Ambassador, however, that there were "limits to (the Vatican's) patience" on this issue, as it was seriously affecting the Church's ability to meet its pastoral needs. Lajolo lamented that there appeared to be "a strong anti-church, anti-Catholic feeling" within the Israeli government -- a view echoed last week by an NGO group active in Catholic-Jewish inter-religious dialogue -- and admitted that the Holy See was not sure what it could do to improve the situation. This frustration is reflected in the Holy See's statement in its memo suggesting it has been placed on an "enemy list." Lajolo noted that the Nuncio in Jerusalem had recently cautioned the Israeli government that, in ignoring the Holy See's concerns and repeatedly stonewalling a resolution of the residency issue, it was alienating one of its better friends.

Text of Vatican Memorandum

Begin text:

Memorandum

a. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem extends over Israel, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Jordan and Cyprus. It must be able to have contact with its faithful and they with it, and to this end the right to train its seminarians and to appoint freely its own religious personnel must be guaranteed. The difficulties placed on the religious personnel of the Latin Patriarchate are not without negative repercussions on the relations between Israel and the Holy See.

b. Israel has always granted residence permits to Jordanian seminarians, without any security risk being verified. Seminarians and religious personnel are not like any other citizens, whose activities in the territory may not be known to the Authorities.

c. Both the Patriarchate and the Nunciature (which grants the Laissez-Passer to them) assume responsibility for them; to cite reasons of security constitutes a lack of regard for the two institutions which sponsor them.

d. Israel is free to place whatever countries it wishes on its enemy list, but Catholics in themselves cannot be considered enemies of Israel.

e. The "Fundamental Agreement" (art. 3, sec. 2) recognizes the right of the Church "to train, appoint and deploy" its own personnel in its institutions of a religious, moral, educational and charitable character.

12th December 2002: The Head of State of Israel, Moshe Katsav, promises the Cardinal Secretary of State his personal attention concerning the question of visas.

10th July 2003: Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Silvan Shalom, receives from the Cardinal Secretary of State a "pro - memoria" which raises, in point number 2, the question of the issuing of visas to religious personnel.

11th December 2003: The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shalom, explains to the Cardinal Secretary of State that the difficulties are due to Israeli bureaucracy and to concerns over security; he proposes the setting up of a working group

to study pending questions.

23rd March 2004: The Nuncio writes a letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs (with copies to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs) indicating that, in clear violation of a number of points of the Fundamental Agreement, the situation had not been resolved.

To date there are at least 138 known cases of pending requests for the granting of a residence permit, (89 male Religious and seminarians (of whom 66 are Franciscans!) and 49 Religious Sisters): the majority of these people have already been in the Country for a number of years (some for more than 15) and need a simple renewal. Of the applicants, 54 come from Asia or the West, and 84 are Arabs from various countries. In particular, it seems that the political line taken in recent times is to deny the residence permit to those who, in the past, have worked permanently or who intend to work in the Palestinian Territories. That is tantamount to impeding the provision of pastoral care in the Territories, access to which is now possible only through Israel.

From the Vatican, April 6th, 2004.

End text.

HARDT

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2004VATICA01445 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL